DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 621 CS 500 989

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TITLE Authority and Mass Media as Variables in Rumor Transmission.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Newport Beach, California, November 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; College Students; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Credibility; Higher Education; *Information Dissemination; *Mass Media; Media Research; *News Media; Social Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Rumors

ABSTRACT

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ED102621

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AUTHORITY AND MASS MEDIA AS VARIABLES IN RUMOR TRANSMISSION

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Abstract

This paper offers the hypothesis that in times of low collective excitement rumors in a complex society whose content is beyond normal social discourse (a spectral rumor, for instance) will increasingly exhibit one or the other, or both, of two legitimizing agents--authority and mass media--as a means of gaining greater plausibility and acceptance.

This shift to include such an agent(s) has been occasioned by the greater pervasiveness of the mass media in day-to-day affairs, and two processes that have accompanied this pervasiveness, (1) the status-conferral function, and (2) the accepted veracity of the news media as a result of its accountability and source identifiability.

The paper also suggests that the use of these legitimizing agents is more extensive in the actual transmission of a rumor than in the investigative or laboratory setting; and that the use of legitimizing agents may be more common in a rumor's early stages of transmission than in its later stages.

AUTHORITY AND MASS MEDIA AS VARIABLES
IN RUMOR TRANSMISSION

Of the many forms of communication, one is rumor, unconfirmed news that is widely transmitted through informal, oral networks in an attempt to construe the on-going social environment. Furthermore, rumor is a collective transaction whose component parts consist of intellectual and communicative activity (Shibutani, 1966:164).

In short, say Lang and Lang (1967:53), it is a collective effort to find a definition.

Critical to rumor construction is rumor acceptance. In their book, The Psychology of Rumor, Allport and Postman (1947:61) touch briefly on this point when they note, "In order to gain credibility, rumors often masquerade as facts or cite high authority to support their cause." In the years since, little investigative attention has been given this aspect of rumor acceptance.

This paper focuses on this aspect and offers the hypothesis that as a society moves toward greater involvement with mass communication there will be a concomitant move toward greater involvement of "fact" and "authority" to implement the acceptance of a rumor. More particularly will this be the case with scare rumors, or rumors that report the unusual.

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Theoretical Considerations

The theoretical support for this position is as follows. Modern society is a new form of social living. People interact in larger numbers, at longer distances, and in more complex ways than in any previous period. It is the media systems of communication--as opposed to the earlier oral systems--that give unity and cohesion to present society. As Wirth (1948:10) notes, "It is upon the mass media that to an ever-increasing degree the human race depends to hold it together. Mass communication is rapidly becoming, if it is not already, the main framework of the web of social life."

While the primary relationships within the family, the neighborhood, and the friendship group are much the same as in the earlier periods, other changes, technological, administrative, and structural, have modified the other aspects of social interaction almost beyond recognition (Merrill, 1969:393). It is mass communication that has become the basic mode of interaction in these other areas of human behavior.

Two factors have accompanied the rise of mass communication, (1) the status-conferral function, and (2) the identifiable and accountable dimension of the news media.

One function of mass communication conceptualized by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) is the status-conferral function. Simply put, the mass media can bestow status upon an individual or group or issue merely by singling such out for attention. That is, by presenting the

individual or group or issue to an audience. Apparently, says Lazarsfeld and Merton, members of society subscribe to the circular belief that if someone (or something) really matters, he will be at the focus of mass media attention, and, if one is the focus of mass media attention, then one must really matter.

The status-conferral function, perhaps, grew out of the notion that in the practice of journalism, things or individuals of any worth were presented as news. In summary, if it had substance, the media would report it.

The second factor is the propensity by members of society to accept quite readily as fact that which is reported by the mass media. Perhaps this propenisty grew out of the notion that, to a large extent, in the news media the source is identifiable and accountable. As Lang and Lang (1967:60) assert, "Editors and commentators can [illegible] extricate themselves from the responsibility for evaluating the news they pass on." The news that is passed on thus has the "seal of approval of the entire news organization, which must always face the possibility of libel suits." Further, within the news media there are most often fixed standards of acceptability, verification procedures, and codes of reliable conduct. "The fixing of responsibility, considerations of personal pride, and concern over one's reputation within the organization," says Shibutani (1966:21), "tends to temper the pursuit of personnel predilections at the expense of accurate communication." Thus, news becomes equated with "facts."

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This perspective--that consequential news is reported and reported quite accurately--offers a viable explanation for society's extensive interaction with its media systems.

The implication this has for rumor comes from the observation (Shibutani, 1966:164) that people in a complex society will turn first to the media systems to get that information felt necessary to keep their bearings in a rapidly changing world, and, following that, will then turn to the oral systems. Rumor, as oral news, says Shibutani, is actually a substitute for the "official" or "verified" news disseminated by the mass media and other formal channels. It is, then, the unsatisfied demand for this verified news--the discrepancy between information needed to come to terms with a changing environment and what is provided by formal news channels--that constitutes the crucial condition for rumor construction.

Collective excitement, as it pertains to rumor, is a state of tension existing in a public. Collective excitement is usually divided into three types, high, moderate, and low (Blake, 1969). Of concern here is that each type--or level--of excitement makes differing demands upon oral news, particularly, and upon all news, generally. For instance, in times of high collective excitement the demand for news is high. Members of the public do not receive sufficient news about their focus of interest. In this state of tension, there is a relaxation of conventional norms governing social distance, sources of information, and subject matter. The exchange of news most often takes place spontaneously

with anyone present and is expressive of the emotional dispositions shared by some portion of the public, and, as a result, is frequently inconsistent with cultural axioms (Shibutani, 1966).

By contrast, in times of low collective excitement (day-to-day living) the unsatisfied demand for news is low because of the output of the media systems. In the oral exchanges there is a shared understanding concerning who may address whom, on what subjects, under what circumstances, and with what degree of confidence. Under these conditions, the message content needs to be plausible and consistent with cultural axioms (Blake, 1969; Shibutani, 1966).

In times of low collective excitement, how then can those rumors whose content is beyond that of ordinary discourse--the exaggerated, the deceptive, the mendacious, the spectral, for instance--gain the plausibility necessary for transmission? This paper suggests that such rumors do so by utilizing one or both of two legitimizing agents:

(1) cites an authority (status-conferral) who delivers the message via

(2) a medium of mass communication (accountability of the press) as a form of verified news.

In summary, the shift from a traditional society to a complex society has occasioned a shift from oral systems to media systems of communication. As a result, much social interaction takes place either directly through the mass media or through groups that are themselves

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influenced by the mass media. Nevertheless, the oral systems have remained, particularly as networks for news dissemination concerning family, friends, and neighbors, but also as sources of information when the formal channels fail to provide sufficient news of a broader range.

However, in times of low collective excitement when oral news is of interest beyond the confines of a neighborhood or is tension-producing by the nature of its content, it may need the "tag" of the mass media, which disseminated verified news, before it will be accepted. Such a tag acts as a legitimizing agent for acceptance. Without this media tag the rumor may be discarded as a result of inadequate plausibility.

In short, the structural change to a complex society and a media system affected a shift in the nature of rumor construction within the remaining oral systems. This hypothesis suggests why earlier research on rumor had not identified these legitimizing influences, and further suggests that new research on certain types of rumor (mendacious, spectral, etc.) might well identify such factors.

Two popular rumors of the 1960's are of this type and offer support for this position. One, termed by CBS is the documentary, "Case History of a Rumor," the Operation Watermoccasin rumor (a UN plot to takeover the US) included the late Congressman James B. Utt of California as the authority and numerous mass media--as one woman said, "It must be true because I heard it on the radio"--as legitimizing

agents. This rumor circulated in the early and mid-1960's. Its dissemination reached from coast to coast.

The second, most often referred to as the Kennedy Alive rumor (President Kennedy living as a vegetable in a Dallas, Texas, hospital) most often cited Truman Capote as the authority, and Time magazine as the mass medium. This rumor circulated in the late 1960's. It, too, was disseminated from coast to coast (Blake, 1971).

An opportunity to further test this hypothesis presented itself in the fall of 1973 when a rumor that was well beyond the range of ordinary social discourse, or as Allport and Postman (1947:134) put it, "the garden variety of everyday rumor," swept northeast Ohio and other contiguous areas. The investigation of this rumor provided additional insights into the nature of authority and mass media as legitimizing influences in rumor construction.

The rumor stated:

Jeane Dixon, writing in her syndicated column, predicted that in the last two weeks of October a man with a hatchet would kill several coeds at a small college in Ohio whose name contained seven letters, the first of which was M.

The state of Ohio has six colleges whose name begins with the letter M. They are Malone College, Canton; Marietta College, Marietta; Mary Manse College, Toledo; Miami University, Oxford; Mount Union College, Alliance; and Muskingum College, New Concord (Furniss, 1973).

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Not one of the schools' names contains seven letters. But Mount Union, a four-year undergraduate institution, qualified as the locale when written "Mt. Union," as is frequently the case.

Methodology

Phase One

The data for this analysis was collected in two phases at Mount Union College. The first phase of data collection took place when the rumor and the behavioral effects that resulted from it were at a peak (October 22-23, 1973). At this point, a questionnaire was distributed to several lower and upper division sociology courses.

It was not the intent of the investigators that the original sample be representative of the entire studentbody, which consisted of 1,264 students at the time the data were collected. The purpose was to test the hypothesis in an exploratory fashion. At the same time, the sample was comprised of 146 students or 12 percent of the studentbody. The proportion of students from each class, freshman through senior, in the total sample approximated the proportion of students in each class for the studentbody as a whole. This was quite by accident.

As can be seen in Table 1, freshmen and juniors were in exact proportion. There was a differential of 2 percent for seniors and 8 percent for sophomores, who registered the widest disparity between proportion of the sample and proportion of the students. It cannot be concluded that this sample is representative of the campus as a whole, since there is no record of the disciplines represented by the student

Table 1. Sample by Class: Size and Percentage in Relationship to Total College.

	College		Sample	
Class	Size	Percent	Size	Percent
Freshman	430	34	49	34
Sophomore	331	27	28	19
Junior	252	20	29	20
Senior	244	19	30	21
Special	7	--	--	--
No Answer	--	--	10	6
TOTAL	1264	100	146	100

respondents, and since there is a disproportionately large number who were sociology majors, although there is no exact count of the actual number.

The data collected in this first phase supported the hypothesis. When asked to write a short narrative of the rumor as they heard it, 98 respondents--or 67 percent--of the 146 total respondents included the element "Jeane Dixon predicted." Further, 26 respondents--or 18 percent--included the element of media dissemination of the prediction, with newspapers ranking first, followed by radio. No other media were cited. (See Table 2.)

Phase Two

The results of the first phase were so suggestive that a second and more systematic phase was initiated. A systematic, stratified random sample (Selltiz, et al., 1965:526-533; Miller, 1970:57; Forcese and Richer, 1973:123-133) by class was drawn and another questionnaire was administered over the telephone by trained interviewers. The telephone interviews were made between January 7 and 11 (1974). Any respondent who could not be reached by telephone was contacted and interviewed personally. Sample response in the second phase of the study was 100 percent.

This follow-up phase was undertaken to examine with greater precision the role played by both authority and mass media as status-conferral agents and verified news disseminators in the process of rumor acceptance.

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The rationale behind the drawing of this second sample is as follows. Each rumor has its own public (Allport and Postman, 1947:180). Or, more properly, creates its own public. This rumor public develops wherever there is a community of interest--people who share common interests and purposes (Allport and Postman, 1947; Blake, 1972). Outside of the artifically created rumor environments used in many investigations, a rumor public is difficult to identify.

In the present study, however, the nature of the rumor, the physical size of the campus, and the small student population all combined to give credence to a fairly definable public. This was further confirmed in the study's first phase when only one respondent in a sample of 146 indicated he had not heard the rumor.

From the position, then, that the student population at Mount Union College constituted a rumor public, a valid sample could be of benefit to this investigation for its statistical properties. Accordingly, a sample of 118 was drawn and interviewed in the second phase.[1]

Aside from the way in which the data were collected, the major difference between phase 1 and 2 was the method of ascertaining the content of the rumor. In Phase 1, the respondents wrote the rumor. In Phase 2, the respondents were asked to relate verbally to a telephone interviewer, the content of the rumor. Elements of the rumor were

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[1]This number constituted 10 percent of those students who returned to Mount Union College for the winter term who were present on the campus fall term when the rumor was active and when Phase 1 was initiated. No new incoming students were included for reason of their absence fall term and consequently were not part of the original rumor public.

then checked off by the interviewer as the respondent related them. Following this, the interviewer then asked the respondent if he had also heard any of the elements he had not related.

The elements were:

1. Jeane Dixon predicted
2. Mass media dissemination
3. Hatchet man
4. Death
5. Late October
6. Small Ohio college
7. Seven letters in name, beginning with M

Results and Conclusions

As with the first phase, the data collected in the study's second phase supported the study hypothesis. In relating the rumor, 111 respondents, or 94 percent of the 118 total respondents in the survey included the element "Jeane Dixon predicted." Further, 60 respondents, or 51 percent, included the element of media dissemination of the prediction. Again newspapers ranked first in frequency; radio followed. No other media were mentioned. (See Table 3.)

Depending upon the nature of the rumor, it could be expected that one or the other of the two legitimizing agents would appear with more frequency. In this rumor, because of the popularity of the name Jeane

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Table 2. Number and Percent of Rumor Elements Appearing in Written Narrative of Rumor (First Phase).

Element	Number	Percent
Jean Dixon Predicted	98	67
Mass Media Dissemination	26	18
Hatchet Man	130	89
Death	133	91
Late October	79	54
Small Ohio College	134	92
Seven Letters in Name, with M	130	89

N=146

Table 3. Number and Percent of Rumor Elements Appearing in Verbal, Prompted Narrative of Rumor (Second Phase).

Element	Number	Percent
Jeane Dixon Predicted	111	94
Mass Media Dissemination	60	51
Hatchet Man	113	95
Death	105	89
Late October	86	73
Small Ohio College	94	80
Seven Letters in Name, with M	105	89

N=118

Dixon, the more logical agent was the authority. Indeed, the authority was cited more often than was the media, 67 percent to 18 percent in Phase 1, and 94 percent to 51 percent in Phase 2.

With a well-known authority there can be an assumption of the media. That is to say, when a friend relates, "The President said today that he expects an upturn in the economy," there is the assumption of the media present, that what the president said was received via the media. We do not think our friend has been to the White House and talked to the president personally.

When in the first phase the respondents recorded their narratives of the rumor, the investigators felt this implied presence of the mass media. Consequently, in the second phase it was expected that this percent would increase as a result of the interviewers' inquiry. A comparison of the data shows that this is the case. In Phase 1, 26 respondents, or 18 percent, included the mass media. By contrast, in Phase 2, when the respondent was asked specifically if he had heard of a medium of mass communication, 60, or 51 percent, indicated they had.

Since the legitimizing agents are most often not a part of a rumor's "story line," it might be expected that this aspect of the message would appear less frequent than other major elements. Tables 2 and 3 show a summary of the frequency of appearance of the rumor's major elements in both phases. The legitimizing agents rank at or near the bottom in comparison to all other elements in Phase 1. But in Phase 2, the

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authority moves to the highest frequency, suggesting, on the one hand, the importance of at least one legitimizing agent for rumor acceptance, and, on the other hand, the role played by the authority in this particular rumor.

Along this same line, the role of the teller (recipient-transmitter) of a rumor is different from that of a respondent in a rumor study. One basic difference is that the respondent is not concerned with whether or not the investigators accept or reject the rumor. As a result, the respondent would be less inclined to give the legitimizing agents, particularly in Phase 1. On the other hand, the teller of a rumor, when he makes the effort to transmit it to someone else, does have some expectancy that his message will be received favorably. Still, he would be inclined to include the agents to increase the rumor's favorableness.

Tables 2 and 3 tend to support this premise. In the written narratives, the authority was cited by 67 percent of the respondents. Yet, when prompted as to their knowledge of an authority in Phase 2, 94 percent of the respondents answered affirmatively. The mass media had a similar increase. In summary, the aspect of legitimation tends to appear less frequently in the investigative experience than in the natural experience.

It may also be true that each time the rumor is transmitted, it need not include the legitimizing agents. For example, because of individual differences, some people are more prone to accept a rumor

(Blake, McFaul, and Porter, 1974), or a certain kind of rumor, than are other people. For them, the agent(s) is unnecessary.

Further, it may be that a rumor uses an agent(s) more in its early stages of dissemination and less in its later stages. In other words, once a rumor is launched and on its way it has less need of a legitimizing agent(s).

Summary

This investigation lends support to the hypothesis that if it is to create a public, a rumor in a complex society whose content is beyond normal social discourse--a spectral rumor, for instance--will make increased use of a legitimizing agent(s). This shift to include such an agent(s) has been occasioned by the greater pervasiveness of the mass media in day-to-day affairs, and two processes that have accompanied this pervasiveness, (1) the status-conferral function, and (2) the accepted voracity of the news media as a result of its accountability and source identifiability. Consequently, in times of low collective excitement, a rumor may tend to exhibit one or the other, or both, of two legitimizing agents--authority and mass media--as a means of gaining greater plausibility and acceptance.

It also suggests that (1) the use of these legitimizing agents is more extensive in the actual transmission of a rumor than in the investigative or laboratory setting; and (2) that the use of legitimizing agents may be more common in a rumor's early stages of transmission than in its later stages.

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